

The Visitors

By

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The boy struggled and kicked with no sound coming out. Little more than seventeen years old, he hadn't started shaving yet had no more than a few minutes to live. The rope was tight around his neck. Cyanosis was starting to show in his rapidly bluing lips. His kicks were weakening.

“You fucking Jew-boy – you've broken my shoulder” the sergeant shouted.

Blood was pumping over the medic from the bullet wound in the leg of the other sergeant as he fell to the floor.

“Call out the guard, get them in here” the corporal screamed through his tears as he tried to take the full weight of the young serviceman's dying body and ease the pressure of the noose. He'd not seen hanging in all his experience in El Alamein, Suez or East Africa. You couldn't blame Hitler or Nasser this time.

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A short way down the road from the tied cottage sat a black Morris Oxford. Maureen noticed it arrive just after 4 o'clock but could not see the two men inside. She knew that a few minutes after her husband returned from his work there would be a knock on the door.

Helen was sprawled on the grass beheading daisies and Jane, just over a year old, was asleep in her pram as Maureen sat in the deckchair on the lawn and wondered about the men. It was a bright, warm June afternoon, and those men would spoil it.

Mike was out working on the estate, a short distance from Whitby and just a mile from Robin Hood's Bay. As five o'clock drew near, Maureen called to Helen and carried Jane indoors. As she peeled the potatoes, Jane was in her cot and Helen bustled around her feet. She heard the estate van stop outside.

Boots crunched on the gravel as he walked up the front path and Maureen caught the smell of game as he walked in.

'I've got a brace for supper' he said as he patted her bottom and kissed the back of her neck - 'a Wednesday special again'. Two rabbits thumped onto the pine table.

‘You and your Wednesday specials smell! Keep them out of here until you’ve cleaned them or we’ll have the flies coming in. And while we’re talking of flies, those men are back. What is it with them - wherever we live they’ve been turning up every year? What’s it all about?’

‘Right I’ll hang them outside the front door for now, and clean them later’.

‘You heard me, what’s it all about?’

She didn’t see the anger in his eyes as he turned, but she heard it in his voice ‘Look love, don’t you get it? I can’t talk about it so don’t keep asking me every time they come!’

Helen began to cry but Jane in the next room was oblivious.

Then came the knock.

‘Mo, I need the parlour - they won’t be here long’.

Maureen said nothing as she went to move Jane to her cot in the bedroom.

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Two hours later they sat down to eat. There was little conversation. Mike was still simmering, while Maureen was wondering when she would break the news about her missed period. She had planned to go back to her work as a local midwife but that looked like a remote possibility now. Things were tough and would likely get harder in the winter.

‘Good stew’.

‘It’s nothing special’.

Mike dashed his cutlery onto the plate.

‘I’m going to the pub, don’t wait on me’.

‘I won’t.’

Jane slept on, oblivious to the tension and hot words, but Helen began to cry as Mike slammed the door.

The next morning Mike left early to be on the estate by 7 o'clock. As he drove the van he thought back to the brief meeting the evening before. It was an annual event and it seemed it would be that way forever - they would never leave him alone. What he knew was too important to them.

The sun was well up as he parked the van under a chestnut tree. The breeze was up in the north east bringing a hint of the sea and Norwegian spruce. The sounds and smells of the country early on a summer's morning were something he relished, breathing deeply as he heard a blackbird singing to warn others away. Then, as he headed towards the outhouses he stopped in his tracks and shook his head. Last night's row with Maureen came to him again and he swore.

He wanted to share his secret with Maureen, but he couldn't. He had responsibilities, a family. He also had other secrets – a brother and sister down in Surrey, where he was brought up, nieces and nephews, but nobody up here knew that.

"Morning Mike'.

'Good morning Sir' he replied, straightening his back and raising his head instinctively. In his pre-occupation, he hadn't noticed the estate manager. Creepy bastard.

'A lovely morning, but you don't look too happy'.

'Had a bad bit of fish last night'.

'It happens. What have you got planned this morning?'

'I'm going to check the North Wood, Sir, I think we've had someone setting snares there again'.

'Good, carry on then. I'll see you in the office at lunchtime'.

'Prick' he thought as he walked over to the keeper's store and unlocked it. He took a shotgun down from the rack, broke it and checked it. He slung a belt of cartridges over his shoulder along with his gamekeeper's bag, and set off to walk the north wood and estate wall.

There was still a sour taste in his mouth. He had parachuted into Egypt as a medic when the Suez Crisis was developing. He had served in Palestine and East Africa, and he had seen some dreadful events supporting mine clearance in North Africa. None were as dreadful as he had witnessed in a

British Army barracks. Although he had been demobbed from the RAMC three years previously, the Army would not let him go completely. He held secrets that the Army wanted to stay secret.

How could he tell Maureen?

‘Although I was only a Corporal, they picked me out’.

‘What do you mean ‘picked you out’?

‘They thought I had potential. When I joined up at 16 I’d been making fence posts for three years. It was a dead end job, and then one day I passed a recruiting office and went in. The army said they would teach me to read and write, and they tried hard to teach me how to think, too. I was bit of a cheeky sod, but my first CO understood me. I liked him too, he was decent - had a gammy leg after being wounded in the First World War. He even called me Michael, and showed some respect for me.

He said I had an IQ of 140, well above my rank. ‘

‘I hope our girls have inherited some of that.’

‘Don’t interrupt, Mo. This is serious. You asked me to tell you and it’s hard for me to talk about. I’m not supposed to tell anyone anything, not a word. It’s all been covered up. You’ve got to swear not to tell another living soul or I will be sent to a military prison – and they’ll never let me out’.

‘But what have you done wrong?’

‘Nothing, nothing at all. I did everything right, I followed orders. No more questions, please. Let me tell it my own way or not at all!

Those men in the car yesterday were here about one job I did. They come back every year to remind me to keep my mouth shut and get me to re-sign the Official Secrets Act.’

Mike licked the sweat off his top lip.

‘They picked me out as I said, and I was transferred to the SIB – the Special Investigation Branch. That’s a section which investigates crime within the Army – thefts and fiddles, even murders. Like policemen – CID. One day, the Colonel called me into his office. I remember his words clearly’:

‘Corporal, get in to your civvies. I’m sending you to live with a family for a few weeks. I want you to let your hair grow, start to look and talk like one of them. Pick up a few words and mannerisms. Stop acting like a soldier.’

‘Why me, Sir?’

‘Because you’ve got the right look about you and I know you can do the job. Make no contact with anyone on the base or any of your family. In a few weeks I will meet you off base to give you a more detailed briefing.’

Maureen bit back her questions as he continued. ‘So, that’s when it all started. He gave me an envelope of fivers and an address to go to, down in the East End. I’d never held so much money and I’d never been to the East End for that matter. That’s how much he trusted me. I put my civvies on and caught the train to London. Then, a bus out to Stepney. There was a still a lots of bomb damage in the area. Quite a shock I had when I got there.’

‘Why?’

‘Well the family lived in a flat over a pawnbroker’s shop - Saul Marks and Son. I’ll never forget them.’

‘A pawnbroker’s?’

‘Yes, they were Jewish pawnbrokers.’

‘Jewish – what on earth was the army doing sending you to live with a Jewish family?’

‘As the Colonel said, ‘You’ve got the right look. Start to talk like one of them. Pick up a few words and mannerisms. You’ll have an ID card and ration book in the name of Lawrence Marks.’

‘I don’t think you look like a Jew.’

‘Well, the Army did but I’m glad they didn’t look too closely. So I moved in with the family, learning to be a Jew, at least on first pass. They were very nice – no kids - and Mr. Marks was obviously ex-army. He never asked why I was there – he must have known my CO or there was some other connection. There had been a son, but a bomb got him one night during the Blitz. They

never found his body. Tragic it was and I don't think they ever recovered from that – who would, ever?

Anyway, I learned a lot from them. They're a lot like us really, normal if you know what I mean, though obviously they were Jewish and they had some strange rituals and customs. I even learned a bit about the pawnbroking business. Anyway, after a few weeks I got a note through the post on plain paper. It was really strange – addressed to me, but as Lawrence Marks. I didn't feel like Lawrence Marks, but I had to learn to answer to the name. The note was unsigned, telling me to go to a particular café on such and such a day, to meet 'someone I would know'.

So I did. It was the Colonel who met me and handed me a parcel – a shoe box it was, wrapped up. Real cloak and dagger stuff. We went for a walk, through the ruins. God, they were hit hard by the Luftwaffe. Poor buggers. More than twelve years on and it was still a mess.'

Anyway, 'Michael', he said '...sorry, I mean Lawrence. You are re-joining the army. Your call-up papers are in there. Learn your background, use the East End family as your cover. Get a train next Thursday to the Induction Camp – it's all there on your National Service call up letter. And handle that parcel carefully – it's got a Browning and ammunition in it – you may need them. Remember the regulations about not carrying a weapon – you will have to break them and keep it concealed. Only the CO at the camp will know your purpose.'

'And what is my purpose, Sir?'

Jane started crying upstairs. Maureen watched as Mike stared across the room, re-living events from years before.

'Sorry darling, I must check Helen and feed Jane - I will only be a few minutes'. He nodded and drifted away.

The train journey to the National Service Induction Camp had been uneventful. There were forty or fifty other lads on the train. The camp processed about one thousand national service conscripts every week. Mike had to act as if he were a raw recruit, not a seasoned soldier six years older who had already seen action, who had held men's insides in place with his hands while they died during mine clearance in El Alamein.

His mind jumped forward. He could remember shouting for help, the smell of cordite mixed with disinfectant and urine, a sergeant groaning with his broken shoulder jammed in a urinal, and blood on the floor and his shirt. Another sergeant with one of Lawrence Marks's bullets in his leg was screaming for help. And all the time he, Mike – Lawrence - was holding up the Jewish recruit to take the weight off the noose around his neck.

The duty officer ran in with two guards and Mike shouted 'Get the CO'. The officer bridled and said 'Steady on, now, you can't talk to me like that.'

'Yes I bloody well can! Get the CO, now or you will be on a charge!' The officer turned and ran out.

Mike looked at the nearest guard 'Help me take his weight and get him down, and you' – he nodded to the other guard – 'take my pistol and watch these bastard sergeants. Don't let them go anywhere'.

Another sergeant arrived and cut the rope. They lowered the Jewish conscript to the floor. He was alive, just. Mike removed the noose and gave him first aid as the CO arrived. The other conscripts were up by now and quickly confined to their quarters. More guards arrived with another medic. The injured sergeants were given first aid and then arrested. The CO took over and ordered Mike to his office.

'Well done, Marks, you saved that man's life and we've got to the bottom of this dirty business at last. You are not to discuss this with anyone, save your direct CO. That is a clear order. Understood?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'There will be nothing in writing'.

'Understood, Sir.'

Then Lawrence was warned of the dire consequences if the episode was not kept secret. These would include a court martial – in secret - and sentencing to a military prison.

‘Collect your kit and go straight to the guardhouse at the main gate. Don’t talk to anyone. There will be a taxi there.’

‘Understood, Sir.’

‘Thank you, Corporal. Dismissed.’

Within 20 minutes Lawrence was in a taxi heading away from the base.

Mike started from his memories as Maureen returned. ‘Mike, you look pale – are you alright – you’re sweating. Shall I make you a cup of tea? Then you can tell me some more.’

‘Yes please, tea would be lovely.’

His hands were trembling slightly as he sipped the tea.

‘They sent me there under cover because at least two Jewish conscripts had been found hanged. It had been reported as suicide, but the senior officers did not believe it and the SIB was called in. I was told to visit the toilets regularly and keep my ears open. My hut was all Jewish recruits grouped together, as they did then – Catholics, Jews and the rest all in their separate huts. That’s why I had to act like one of them, as if I was Jewish.

I had a bunk nearest to the toilets and listened every night. I was in and out of the toilets a lot and the lads started taking the piss – I had to tell them that I had an infection. That made them look up to me, they thought I was a regular with the prossies, experienced.

Then one night – I’d been there just over a week - I heard some noise in the toilets. I ran in half dressed - one conscript was hanging from the cubicle door frame with a sergeant pulling down on his legs and another sergeant egging him on. It was unbelievable - they were laughing while that boy was dying. I got there just in time – I was screaming at them and I even started crying. I lost it and shot one sergeant in the leg as I struggled with the other - I used my elbow and he fell against a urinal and broke his shoulder.

The truth was that the two dead conscripts had been hanged by the two sergeants. It was sport for them, and was becoming a regular thing. They hung the poor boys up and pulled down on their bodies to make it quick. It was murder, although the official files said suicide.

What's worse is that the boys' families will never know – they think their sons killed themselves, and always will. They'll live in shame. The Army is hushing it up. Jewish conscripts being hanged by Army sergeants would not go down well, especially after Hitler and now Israel just becoming a country.

That's why I can't talk about it and that's why these men come back every year to make me sign the Official Secrets Act. I don't know if it will ever stop.'

Maureen held Mike's damp hand. 'That's terrible, I'm so sorry. No wonder you didn't want to talk about it. Whatever happened to those murderers?'

'I don't know. Prison maybe. We'd all know if they had been executed for murder. At least, I think we would. I've lost faith in the Army, the Government, the whole bloody lot of them. I discovered the truth but all they did was cover it up and keep it quiet. My CO was a decent man but his hands were tied too.'

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Mike knew that the visitors would keep coming and he would swear that he had not told anyone. Then, he would take the offered pen and sign the Official Secrets Act yet again every year until the visits stopped, if ever.

He shook his head and took a deep breath. Their type is always around, following orders, he knew. They would never forget him.

He bent down and retrieved the last of his snares. No catch last night.

A bell tinkled. "Morning, Mike" said the postman, just entering the driveway as Mike reached the North gate.

'Good morning to you too, Thomas – a beautiful one isn't it?'

'Aye, it surely is that' he called over his shoulder as his bicycle coasted down the drive.

He shook his head. No, he would not tell Maureen.

In fact, it would be another fifty years until he shared his secret. By then Maureen would be long dead and he would be a grandfather. The men in the black car would be retired if not dead, but there would still be a file, somewhere. A State never forgets.

He walked on along the North wall, picking up the tune of the postman's whistling. Rock and roll or something, they called it. It cheered him up, and he decided he would take the family to Whitby in the van, for an ice cream after tea.

Would anyone really believe his story?

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